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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: EMERGING LEFT PARTY SHAKES UP GERMAN POLITICS

REF: A. FRANKFURT 0697

[B](#). BERLIN 0313

[C](#). HAMBURG 0007

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Jeffrey Rathke for Reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Left Party's electoral successes in western states and gains in the national polls over the past year have transformed this once fringe party of former communists into a weighty political force. The merger of smaller post-communist parties to form the Left Party last year has enabled the party to reach the critical mass necessary to become a viable election option. This phenomenon has resulted in a five-party system, causing other major parties to seek new and innovative ways to achieve majority coalitions. Embassy contacts attribute the Left Party's gains in western states to its ability to attract voters who perceive themselves or others as hurt by economic reforms or globalization. The Left Party will likely continue to influence German politics as a voice in the opposition. Left Party participation in a national government remains unlikely, but a coalition at the state level in the west is possible in 2009 in Saarland. End Summary.

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Rise of the Left: A Major New Player in National Politics  
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[2](#). (SBU) Within the past year, the Left Party -- until recently dismissed as an eastern German phenomenon -- has entered the parliaments of the western states of Bremen, Lower Saxony, Hesse, and Hamburg. Some polls now rank the Left Party as the third-most popular party nationwide, ahead of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), indicating a dramatic rise from below five percent a year ago to 11-to-14 percent today.

[3](#). (C) Left Party caucus chairman Gregor Gysi told Political MC on March 4 that the main reason for his party's growth in support is the economic reform policy introduced by former SPD Chancellor Schroeder. Gysi asserted that many of the Left's new voters are former SPD supporters who want a return to social-market economic policies that the SPD had once advocated. Left Party parliamentarian and caucus deputy chairman Bodo Ramelow and SPD Deputy Director for International Affairs Markus Engels echoed these views in separate meetings. They attributed the Left's rise to its ability to attract support from the economically disadvantaged, especially the unemployed, from those who fear the effects of globalization, or who sympathize with the disadvantaged. SPD parliamentarian Michael Mueller told Poloffs March 10 that the "Left Party is strong because the other major parties are weak" and that the rise of the Left Party is part of an overall trend of growth of smaller parties.

14. (SBU) The Left Party's rise is also due to the viability it gained through the June 2007 merger of the eastern-rooted PDS (remnants of the SED party that ruled East Germany for 40 years) with the western WASG (Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice) movement, which was led by disaffected former SPD Chairman Oskar Lafontaine. The Left Party is now the most popular political party in the eastern states. Still, in the west, the Left Party suffers from a reputation tarnished by its association with former East Germany, its isolationist foreign policy, and its stated goal of "overcoming capitalism" -- for which it has been placed under observation by the Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution (Germany's domestic intelligence agency). Additionally, the SPD leadership and many members still harbor ill-will toward Lafontaine for leaving the party and founding a competing movement. However, even after Lafontaine's eventual departure there will remain serious policy obstacles to SPD and Left Party cooperation.

15. (C) Despite these handicaps, Ramelow predicted to poloffs February 26 that if the SPD continues to implement economic reforms, the Left Party would continue to grow, with the aim of reaching 15 percent national support, which would make it Germany's undisputed third-strongest party. He also predicted that, over time other parties will consider it more acceptable to form coalitions with the Left Party. The Green Party was also once a pariah, Ramelow noted, but has since slowly become part of the political mainstream. He added that the starkest differences between his party and others is in the foreign policy arena, where the Left Party stands alone in its opposition to most German deployments abroad, including in Lebanon and Afghanistan. When asked if the Left Party would also moderate its foreign policy positions, as

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the Green Party had done over time, Ramelow indicated that this would be difficult, but that some policy evolution would occur. Gysi gave a similar answer, suggesting that the party could shift over time to support German participation in military action sanctioned by the UN Security Council. (Note: Gysi and Ramelow have the reputation among politicians from other parties for being among the more reasonable voices in the Left Party, so these views do not reflect party consensus. End note.)

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The Left Party Influences the Political Agenda  
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16. (C) The rise of the Left Party and, consequently, of the five party system have affected the political calculations of the major parties. Traditional two-party coalitions -- outside of the CDU-SPD "grand coalition" -- no longer can be counted on to yield majorities. Hesse SPD leader Andrea Ypsilanti's failed scheme to become minister-president of Hesse with the support of the Left Party was one attempt to exploit the challenges and opportunities of the new five-party landscape (reftel A). In Hamburg (where the FDP is not represented in parliament), the CDU is responding by expanding its options by courting the Greens. The success of relatively moderate CDU ministers-president in Hamburg and Lower Saxony, in comparison to the difficulties experienced by Koch in Hesse, reinforces a general tendency in the CDU under Merkel to identify itself with more centrist rather than right-wing policy goals.

17. (C) Although the Left Party has made progress by entering western state parliaments, even the party's leaders are skeptical about entering western state governments, let alone the national government. (Note: The city-state of Berlin is the only state where the Left Party is part of a governing coalition. Ramelow hopes to become minister-president of the eastern state Thuringia in July 2009. End note.) Gysi said that he thought coalitions on the state level in the west were not advisable yet. However, SPD national business

manager Martin Gorchelt told PolMC March 13 that an SPD-Left Party coalition in Saarland was conceivable after late 2009 elections there. (Left Party co-Chairman Lafontaine was minister-president of Saarland during his SPD career, and retains significant voter sympathy there.) Further, according to Gysi, "a coalition with the SPD on the national level is not feasible, as we are too far apart on issues" and "the mood is not there now" for such an alliance. He added a potential SPD-Left Party alliance would require "wise and strategic preparation, and (SPD Chairman Kurt) Beck is incapable of that." He said that the conditions inside the Left Party would not be right until 2010 or 2011, suggesting that a coalition at the national level might be possible after the 2013 elections.

18. (C) For the time being, the role of the Left Party is not to govern, but rather to influence other parties and the political agenda. Gysi said that the Left Party benefits by raising "issues that no other party promotes." The emergence of the Left Party has already pulled the SPD towards the left (manifested by Chairman Beck's initiative to partially roll-back economic reforms) and moved the CDU more towards the center (as evidenced by the CDU's acceptance of a minimum wage in the postal sector).

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Comment: Left Party Will Remain Influential  
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19. (C) We do not expect Germany to be governed by the Left Party at the national level in the foreseeable future. There is little appetite in Germany for the Left Party's total isolationism or a return to strident socialism. But as long as there are those who are disadvantaged by economic reform and globalization, or dissatisfied with Germany's increasing role in international affairs, the Left Party will continue to exercise a significant impact on the other major German political parties and their coalition calculations. Precipitated by the Left Party's emergence, the other parties will attempt creative, but unwieldy, two- and three-party coalitions. These will be difficult to form and even harder to hold together due to policy differences. And as the current SPD debacle shows (reftel B), the Left Party is likely to play the role of spoiler in the new constellation of German five-party politics. Ironically, the emergence of the Left Party could make it easier for Merkel's CDU/CSU to remain in power in next year's election cycle, because the SPD is losing voters on the left and in the center and is reluctant to work with the Left Party. From a policy perspective, however, Merkel could be tempted to inch leftward in order to solidify the center that is being

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vacated by the SPD. End comment.

110. (U) This message was coordinated with ConGens Frankfurt and Hamburg.  
TIMKEN JR